

I met a woman on a dating app — and she decluttered my house

When a lifelong hoarding habit became too much, James Brown finally found help

The view of my study over my laptop is pretty clear right now. I can see floor space, the sofa is empty, my magazines are in piles. It hasn't always been like this.

Behind the door is a stack of clear plastic containers full of clutter I've kept as research for my book about the final golden era of magazines. In one I can see a green dragon water pistol that Paul Smith gave me 25 years ago. There are folders, desk diaries, notebooks and photos. Inside a cheap Tesco carrier bag are some Subbuteo table football players, outdated receipts and a tube of eye ointment with a use-by date of November 2005. This will give you an idea of how long I keep hold of things I don't need.

The boxes are a fraction of what I used to have. I haven't managed this on my own: every six months I pay a woman I met on a dating app to come round and sort me out. Don't take that the wrong way — I have a very nice girlfriend as well — but this woman, Julieanne Steel, is a professional declutterer, which helps because I'm almost a semi-professional clutterer.

When I first spoke to her, after a match on an app, I felt we were in different places emotionally. She was very clear about what she wanted whereas I was not long out of a long relationship and intrigued by this way of dating, which hadn't existed the last time I was single. As she talked about her work I found myself becoming increasingly interested. "I've been waiting to meet someone like you all my life. Although not for the reasons you want to hear."

She laughed, we stopped trying to make a romantic connection and she explained how her business worked. As we were speaking I was actually sitting looking at a head-height wall of cardboard boxes staggering under the weight of their contents, which included a sledge, 15 bottles of vodka and a set of golf clubs (I hadn't sledged, drunk or golfed in decades).

With a five-storey townhouse now minus one ex-girlfriend and child, I had decided to retrieve the contents of a lock-up, stuff I'd collected over the past 20 years. The volume of tapes, LPs, singles, mini-discs and CDs I'd kept since I'd worked at the *NME* years before was overwhelming. I told her what I was facing and we arranged for her to come round.

Not being very good at getting rid of things has been an issue because for



Julieanne Steel and James Brown

most of my adult life I've been in media jobs where the PR industry has sent me things. Unsolicited goods have ranged from Ray-Bans at *NME* to Prada skis at *GQ*. Plus there are the things I've actually bought, the ones people have given me, the stuff I've found and thought would be useful.

We live in an era when lifestyle shopping is deemed compulsory, but my parents grew up in an era when things were valued, handed down. Combining both eras doesn't work. You can't shop *and* hoard; you run out of physical and emotional space.

For a few years I was a reluctant fitness columnist for *Men's Health*, not reluctant to write the column, but reluctant to get fit. They would send equipment over — hand weights, running machines, a beautiful rowing machine. This was all well and good for the eight weeks I did an intensive fitness feature for them. It should have all been moved on the moment I realised I wasn't bothered any more. The Water Rower is still in my bedroom. At one point my ex-wife tripped over a sit-up frame support and broke her wrist. Luckily she was able to fashion a sling from one of the many Richard James ties I had kept hold of since the Nineties.

My ex-wife could never get her head round how many unused green boxes of Subbuteo players I had, calling them my "little footballers". I can only

assume it's an aspect of my childhood that I cherish from before my family imploded with divorce, mental illness and eventual suicide. The rare times she attempted to get me to clear stuff out, the "little footballers" stayed.

A week after Julieanne and I had first spoken, she showed up with bin bags, plastic envelopes, small Perspex boxes and a calm can-do attitude. She was going to help me to get rid of stuff, but always with my permission. Considerate decluttering. She was small, had loads of positive energy and was good at listening to why I had kept things. I soon realised there weren't going to be any tug-of-war moments over bin bags.

She also made it clear she wasn't a minimalist. We would concentrate on what I *knew* had to go, but couldn't deal with. As we went along she brought some order to my confusion by explaining each of the bags and boxes she was labelling: "Re-gift, you give to a friend. Recycle, you give to charity. Rubbish, you dispose of. Repurpose, you give things like these unwanted toys to the nursery. Re-use, we're discovering things that are hidden, but of use. Reorganise, we'll get all your magazines and admin together so you can find and use them easily. Resell, you can list things on eBay. Refurbish, you can fix things and use them again. Reminisce, we'll have a keepsake box to store memories."

“In two weeks, 50 years' worth of stuff was edited down

She explained that the process of giving things away to people who need them would actually be far more beneficial for me than hoarding them. And she was right. The first win we had was immediate. I had two sets of brand new netball bibs and an unused ball after a boy v girls netball birthday challenge where my male mates pulled out. She asked if I knew a teacher with an under-resourced PE department.

I announced the kit on Twitter and in minutes I had four replies asking for it. It went that day, an emotional weight off my shoulders, space freed up — and she was right, it felt great. The school was really appreciative.

Some friends I had recently put up had left a cot behind, and within half an hour Julieanne had found a charity involved with a mother and baby centre who came round the next day to collect it. Really good tailormade suits I'd grown out of years before but couldn't bear to part with went that day to a charity shop. And it felt OK. We carried on like this for two weeks and 50 years' worth of stuff was edited down. In the end I wasn't mourning anything.

I'm not completely reformed. The other day I asked my girlfriend if I had anything else I didn't need but had become blind to. "Your eyes are full of chandeliers and light fittings." I just laughed; this is true. Half of them are for when I buy a nice house in the country with tall ceilings, but the other half are because I wish I'd not spent so much on them so getting rid of them will simply highlight the financial loss.

"Also you've still got clothes you've kept because you bought for a reason that no longer exists or don't fit you." She was talking about a blue and white seersucker jacket I bought from Brooks Brothers for a meeting with Aston Martin a number of summers ago. It landed me a lucrative three-week job, but I've never worn it since I arrived home and my son asked me if I was selling ice cream.

There's more like this. A tailored top coat I had made by Timothy Everest when I edited *GQ*, which is unwearable because Nigel Farage now wears them. Two pairs of great brogues, one by Oliver Sweeney, which I love because they remind me of the day he climbed into a lake to be photographed at my suggestion. Insteps necessary because of football injuries mean they no longer fit. Loads of posters and artworks I've bought but not framed or hung. Enough coats to dress a football team...

I reckon I could still easily lose 15 per cent of what I have and only feel good about it, and that's why Julieanne still occasionally comes round. I know I'm not the only person like this. If I were, Julieanne wouldn't be in constant demand. I know for a fact that right now many of you are saving this article in a pile of things you intend to read at a later date. But probably never will. unclutteryourlife.co.uk

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